

Opening Address

Senate President Pro Tem

Bill McKenna

January 8, 1997

Lt. Gov. Wilson, Judge John Anderson, distinguished guests, fellow senators, friends and family members. I would like to welcome each of you to the opening of the First Regular Session of the 89th Missouri General Assembly.

At this time, I would like to introduce some people who are very special to me: my son, Ryan McKenna, daughter, Lisa McKenna and my special friend Debbie Bell.

It's only appropriate that I begin by thanking each of you for allowing me to serve this chamber and this great State as your president pro tem. Come May 16th, I might not be so grateful and you might not be so hopeful.

For all of us in public office it is a distinct honor and privilege to serve our fellow citizens. My constituents have bestowed this privilege upon me both in the House of Representatives and here in the Senate.

I consider myself very fortunate to have had the opportunity to serve this State as a lawmaker. Like each of you, I've worked long and hard to be worthy of the responsibilities my constituents have entrusted to me.

In addition to serving the people of my district, I now have the honor and privilege of serving my fellow senators and the citizens of this great State as president pro tem.

I can't think of a more impressive or demanding constituency than my peers. And like the citizens I represent, I hereby give each of you my pledge of honor to serve to the best of my talents and abilities.

I feel very lucky to follow in the footsteps of good leaders -- make that great leaders -- like presidents pro tem Jim Mathewson and John Scott -- and floor leaders like J. B. "Jet" Banks, the distinguished Senator from the Fifth.

As a citizen, I owe these gentlemen an enormous debt of gratitude for the time and personal sacrifices they have made for the people of this great State.

As a lawmaker, I greatly appreciate the experience and knowledge that they have shared with me. I have learned many things from each of them.

As president pro tem, I will endeavor to build upon their examples as leaders of the Missouri Senate. What a great job they have done. Thank all of you very much.

I was talking to the Senator from the 3rd and I told him I was a little worried about this new job and that I hoped to learn from my mistakes. The Senator from the 3rd looked at me and said "McKenna, with

the amount of mistakes you've made in the Senate so far, you'll no doubt have plenty of learning opportunities."

There are only three lawmakers here today who can truthfully say they've never made a mistake on the floor of the Senate. Of course, those are the Senate's three new members. I'd like to take this opportunity to welcome to the Missouri Senate the new Senator from the 1st, Anita Yeckel, the new Senator from Boone, Ken Jacob and the new Senator from the 29th, Doyle Childers. I congratulate each of you on your election and I heartily welcome you to our Senate family.

As most of you know, the Senator from the 1st is a freshman legislator who, like all freshman lawmakers, is eager to conquer the world. I am sure she will do just fine. On the other hand, the Senate stands ready to help our two former State representatives overcome any bad habits they may have picked up in the House. I am supremely confident that the Senate will help our new colleagues get their feet wet, whether they want our help or not.

We all know that each General Assembly brings its own issues and challenges. Some are the kind of challenges elected officials in most states can only dream about: challenges like cutting taxes.

Let me say that again: CUTTING TAXES.

It would be hard to find a more popular issue than cutting taxes. The only drawback is that in this chamber we have more ideas on how to cut taxes than we have taxes to cut.

How we actually cut taxes will ultimately be left to the wisdom of this body. For more than 175 years, the wisdom of the Senate has steadfastly served the best interests of all Missouri citizens.

The best interests of Missouri citizens will continue to be our primary concern as we debate the recommendations made by the Missouri Citizens' Commission on Compensation for Elected Officials. This constitutional commission was created by the voters of this great State to set the salaries for elected officials in all three branches of government.

But in the end, it will be our collective responsibility to make the ultimate decision regarding the salary commission's recommendations. Unless of course we want to deadlock in a tie vote and let the Lt. Gov. take the heat. Whatever action we take, we're facing a February 1 deadline.

Other issues will have more time to be debated and ultimately resolved. But we can expect them to be just as challenging. For example:

\* Even though Missouri is ahead of the national curve in welfare reform, recent federal legislation will bring even more changes in our welfare system.

\* We have a federal EPA rule that increases air quality standards before we had the opportunity to meet the old air quality standards. What was once solely a St. Louis problem has now become a State-wide problem.

\* Interim committees have been working on issues such as managed care, high school graduation rates, auto auctions and Missouri's probation and parole system.

\* We have a 15 year highway plan that seems to be running out of gas after only 5 years. All of us anxiously await the report from the Governor's Total Transportation Commission.

\* We may be looking at proposals to wind down court-ordered desegregation.

\* And if the last election proved anything, it is that our campaign finance laws need further reform.

One thing is for sure: we won't run out of issues to address.

A full plate is nothing new for the Legislature. Yet at the dawn of the 89th Missouri General Assembly, this Senate must consider not only the issues we resolve, but also the deliberative, equitable and civil way that we resolve them.

The Missouri Senate is a unique political institution. It has been characterized in many ways, and is often referred to as a family.

A couple of weeks ago, all of us here in the Senate received a letter from Catherine Johnson. Catherine is moving from Sen. Mathewson's capitol office to work in his district office.

She addressed that letter simply to "Dear Family", and she reflected on her eight years here in the Senate.

"My first impression of our 'Senate Family' was borne out over time," she wrote. "Party affiliation has no bearing insofar as mutual respect and support was concerned."

"In many ways," Catherine concluded, "working in the Senate is like living in a small town. There are no secrets. And while you might prefer the company of one over another, you'll tolerate no 'outsider's' criticism of any family member."

I feel that the Senate family extends beyond the 34 seats on this floor. It applies to the doormen, the Secretary and staff at the dais, the enrolling staff, the research and appropriations teams, our office personnel and the countless others throughout this magnificent building who professionally and tirelessly perform their jobs day in and day out. We have good and honorable people working for us. We have a good and honorable family.

As Senators, we owe these people our deepest thanks.

We all recognize the importance family plays in our daily lives. I'm from a big family. In fact, my family is so big I have a brother who's also named Bill. But that's another story entirely.

My family -- and the support and experiences they've shared with me -- has helped me in more ways than I could ever express. My family taught me to cooperate, to respect others, to share, to forgive and to love. My Dad has been, and will always be, my greatest hero.

And no matter how accomplished or successful we might become, our family will always be our foundation and our single greatest source of support and protection.

A few years ago, the Senator from Bates had put an incredible amount of work and effort into a key measure he sponsored. It was a bill he wanted to pass very badly. In the final days of the session,

members of the House marched on the Senate and demanded he release the bill so that they could act on it.

But the Senator from Bates had given his word that he would kill the bill if certain provisions were added. These provisions had, in fact, been added.

I remember that day very clearly. You could hear a pin drop as the Senator from Bates spoke.

He shared with us on this floor how he had struggled with this dilemma. And how, in making a final decision, he had sought the advice and counsel of his father.

Like his father -- and his father before him -- the Senator from Bates proved that he is an honorable and courageous man. The Senator from Bates kept his word. He was true to himself, he was true to this chamber, and he was true to the wisdom and counsel of his family.

There is a lesson for all of us in the example set that day: a reminder of the supreme importance of keeping our word and being true to our personal and professional relationships.

As members of this Senate family, we have inherited almost two centuries of tradition and experience that make this body especially effective in serving the citizens of this great State.

None of us here invented these traditions. They are the work of no single lawmaker, but of the Senate family as a whole as it has evolved over time.

These traditions -- this Senate protocol -- exist for one primary reason: to provide the best possible government for the citizens of the great State of Missouri.

I will be the first Senator -- and the first president pro tem -- to leave office as a result of constitutional term limits. I am the first president pro tem who knows his opening address to a new general assembly will also be his final address to a new general assembly. I bet you're all glad to hear that.

In a very short period of time, not one Senator sitting here today will be left in this chamber. The Senate will be forever denied the institutional memory of people like the Senator from the 14th, or the Senator from Laclede, or the Senator from Shannon. This will be a tremendous loss to Missouri.

We must have the courage and foresight to ensure that any change caused by term limits does not compromise the careful and deliberative way the Senate serves the citizens of Missouri.

We must never forget that what we do in this chamber affects our employers, the citizens of Missouri, in a very personal and intimate way.

We must make certain that duly elected legislators continue to control the peoples' branch of government and that no influence or power is shifted to the lobbyists and the entrenched bureaucracies.

We must be true to the spirit of our forefathers and strive to maintain and nourish the fundamental hallmarks of this great body -- tolerance of diverse view points, civility in all discourse, and full and open debate.

The actions we take as Senators in the 89th Missouri General Assembly will set important and lasting precedents. We must work together -- in the tradition of the Senate family -- to ensure the precedents we set for future generations are as sound and of the quality and character as the great traditions that have been passed down to us. This continuity will ultimately be our greatest legacy.

Now let's roll up our sleeves and get down to work.

Thanks again for this opportunity. My Father would be very proud. God bless all of you.